
The Republic of Timor-Leste was not born with a silver spoon in its mouth. After more than three centuries of Portuguese rule, twelve shaky days of independence in 1975, and 24 years of brutal Indonesian domination, the country was detached from its occupier in the course of an orgy of destruction and murder in 1999. Almost a decade after the formal declaration of independence in 2002, fifteen academics and professionals of Australian affiliation take up the pen to assess a number of social, administrative and economic aspects of post-Indonesian Timor-Leste. In his foreword to the volume, the East Timorese secretary of state for defence, Júlio Tomás Pinto, optimistically notes ‘the great strides made by Timor-Leste in the area of development in recent years. However, Timor-Leste still has some way to go’ (p. xvi). This is to put things very mildly. As the various contributions point out, the task lying ahead of the politicians is gargantuan. A decade after independence, Timor-Leste is still one of the poorest countries in the world in terms of GDP per capita; in 2013 it is expected to be one third of the GDP per capita of Laos, and less than one percent of that of Australia.

The editorial work is respectable but given the price of the volume some good photographs might have been provided. I also question the absence of diacritic signs (Joao rather than João) and the omission of most personal and geographical names from the index. As can be expected of an edited volume that mostly consists of updated conference papers, the analytical interest of the thirteen contributions varies widely. In general the essays seem well informed, often apparently based on first-hand experience in the field. A few of them may have been better served in another forum. Thus, Grant Edwards’ and Tess O’Donnell’s essay on the police development program seems more of a policy statement or report than an academic study. Taken together, however, the anthology tellingly highlights the problems of development lying ahead. Gender issues are discussed in two essays by Sara Niner and Yvonne Corcoran-Nantes. As they demonstrate, the experiences from the struggle against Indonesian occupation, where women held important roles, is often at odds with the promotion of Timorese culture by
politicians who have even slighted gender equity as a disruptive foreign import. In spite of a nascent movement for women’s rights, domestic violence and denial of female agency are common in current society. There need not necessarily be an insoluble contradiction, as Sara Niner comments: ‘Timorese society has shown both a great resilience and ability to absorb and incorporate foreign elements and gender equity should be no exception’ (p. 55).

Three essays detailing economy and demography offer gripping and somewhat worrying perspectives. The truth is that Timor-Leste is caught in an under-development trap which will require resolute policies to amend. As pointed out by Udoj Saikia and Merve Hosgelen, the nation has got the highest birth rate in Asia, and indeed among the highest in the world. The total population is expected to increase by 69 percent over the years 2005-2020, reaching 1.67 million by the latter year. Although the GDP should increase by 131 percent during the same period according to the more optimistic reckoning, it will still be a very small improvement by comparative standards. The unemployment rate for an increasingly young population will certainly lead to great social stress.

The various studies tend to come back again and again to the disruptive events in 2006 and 2008 which shattered the image of a new nation in steady progress. The riots in April-May 2006 were presented in the media as an affair between westerners and easterners (kaladi and firaku). However, a long essay by James Scambury demonstrates the multiple identities at play. The chronology of the violence reveals a series of phases where groups (ethnic groups, gangs, organizations, professions) allied and then split. The riots inevitably raise the question of Timor-Leste’s future, which is the subject of a final essay by Vandra Harris and Andrew O’Neill. How will the fledgling republic develop in the current decade until 2020? As they see it, the development indicators do not inspire optimism. Oil and gas incomes do not make up for a rapidly increasing population in a small and typically resource-scarce territory. Foreign aid can cushion the effects of under-development but only to a degree. On the positive side, there are no acute external threats, and the international community, in particular Australia, will presumably prevent a major political meltdown or large-scale internecine violence. Finally, we should bear in mind that Timor-Leste has been struggling for only a decade to achieve what Indonesia has striven for in
64 years, the Netherlands in 432 and Sweden in 1000. Things will simply not happen overnight.

Hans Hägerdal
Linnaeus University
hans.hagerdal@lnu.se